Constructive Engagement of the Development Community to Promote Water Quality Protection

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A Project "Cookbook" and Lessons Learned
from
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"Marketing the Economic benefits of Sustainable Development Practices in the Rappahannock River Watershed"

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Purpose

The purpose of this report is to share one group's approach to addressing the problem of urban water quality impairment in a rapidly developing watershed. We share this information in the hope that other nonprofit groups or agencies will benefit from our lessons learned, and hopefully undertake similar projects in their own watersheds.

We believe that constructive engagement of the development community is a key tool in the advocate's toolkit, and one that is all too often overlooked. Our ultimate responsibility is to protecting our river resource, and consequently there continues to be situations where we are in direct conflict with the development community. However, this approach has opened up a venue where immediate conflict is not the default response, and the frequency of these less-effective interactions is reduced. Used strategically, constructive engagement is a tool that can increase the effectiveness of your advocacy, without compromising your ability to resort to heavier tools in your toolkit.

Efficacy in this arena, especially for nonprofits, may require acquisition of new skills and adoption of new perspectives. This report will profile our goals and process, analyze our key "en-route" changes, and offer a number of lessons learned.

Our specific project focused on advocacy for the use of innovative water quality BMPs. We have endeavored, however, to make this document as generic as possible in order to apply to any type of constructive engagement of developers.

Background

The population of the Rappahannock River watershed is growing at the fastest rate in the state of Virginia, and at one of the fastest rates in the eastern United States. This growth has fueled a robust development market, which is rapidly changing the face of the watershed. The rapid land use change in the watershed poses a challenge for maintaining and enhancing environmental quality in the basin, while still fostering an appropriate climate for economic growth.

In 1997, The Friends of the Rappahannock requested $20,000 from the U.S. EPA Sustainable Development Challenge Grant (SDCG) Program to catalyze **an innovative educational partnership with land developers in the**

Rappahannock River watershed. The goal of the ongoing project is to teach land developers about the state-of-the-art in reduced-impact development practices. Through the compilation of a "developer's reduced-impact manual" and individual meetings with developers, our goal is to help developers channel the watershed's growth toward sustainable practices, while also equipping them to use "green development" as a marketing tool for enhancing their economic bottom line.

Project Goals

Land development is at the heart of the economy in the central Rappahannock watershed. In its *current form*, certain land development practices are also pushing the watershed towards an environmentally unsustainable future. The purpose of this project is to help channel our watershed's development toward sustainable practices by "selling" the economic benefits of a voluntary "green development" program.

The project has three central goals:

- ***catalyze*** *a community partnership* aimed at helping land developers enhance environmental quality on their sites
- ***demonstrate*** *the economic benefits* to developers of voluntary reduced-impact practices on development sites
- ***educate*** *land developers* on proven reduced-impact techniques in order to facilitate the ongoing implementation of sustainable development practices.

Project Results

The project has achieved significant results, and it is now an ongoing program and a centerpiece of our advocacy efforts. Key accomplishments include:

1. Success in breaking down the distrust and stereotyping that existed between the environmental and development community. Building of personal relationships with numerous individuals in the development community.
2. Constructive engagement of a cross section of the development community in substantive dialog on development, conservation, and roadblocks to implementation of conservation.
3. Successful identification of key points of common ground upon which to build basis of cooperation.
4. Successful education of developers and their engineers on the environmental, economic and marketing benefits of specific water quality practices.
5. "Buy-in" by several builders and developers into the use of several innovative practices for water quality protection.
6. Installation of several innovative, on-the-ground water quality BMP's, with several others in the design stages, and more planned in the near future.

Process: How We Planned It

The project had five distinct phases:

1. **Research Phase.**
   - Collection of design, effectiveness, and cost information on innovative practices for reducing pollution from land development. This includes water, soil, air, and energy-related pollution prevention/minimization practices.
   - Research and quantification of all avenues of economic benefit associated with the implementation of these practices.

2. **Collaboration Phase**.
   - Meetings with local developers to solicit pro's and con's on reduced-impact techniques from an *economic perspective*.
   - Meetings with project's financial sponsors and community representatives to gain consensus on the types of practices to promote.
   - Collection of input, design of strategies for reducing costs while maintaining environmental benefits.

3. **Manual Preparation Phase.**
   - Synthesis of information and comments into a "Developer's Reduced-Impact Manual". The product would be a straightforward tool for developers to use in planning and implementing environmentally friendly practices on development sites.
   - Technical editing, review and comment by project stakeholders.

4. **Marketing / Outreach Phase.**
   - Individual meetings by staff and interns with developers who are active in the Rappahannock River watershed. Focus of approach centers on teaching about the economic benefits of using "green development" practices.
   - Building of personal, working relationships with developers. Introduction/distribution of manual to developers as a tool for their use. Assistance to developers in implementing innovative pollution reduction practices.
   - Implementation of an innovative, sustainable development demonstration practice for use with developers as a demonstration project.

5. **Evaluation, Documentation, and Final Report Phase**
   - Collection and analysis of post-meeting surveys with developers.
   - Assessment of results relative to preset targets.
   - Compilation of a "cookbook" to facilitate project duplication in other watersheds.
   - Preparation of final report. Critical analysis of successful and unsuccessful elements.

Process: How It Actually Unfolded

The **Research Phase** was the cornerstone of the project. Because the state of the art in low impact development practices was rapidly evolving "under our feet," our research phase continued throughout the project. This was often frustrating, because what seemed to be the "best" one month was shadowed by something new that we would learn about the next. Consequently, the document of innovative practices the we were developing always seemed to be a little behind our current thinking. Our researche focused on identifying the "state of the art" water quality protection practices, and profiling real world cases where these practices were used successfully.

Mid-Course Correction - Widen Target Audience:
Early in the project we realized that our target audience was not just "developers". In fact, we came to realize that developers were often contracting out the water quality BMP decisions to their engineers or even their architects. With these professionals as our target audience, we knew that a technical approach would be critical, in addition to our planned economic assessments. We modified our research to include more engineering and design data, and to address common engineering questions for the new practices.

The **Collaboration Phase** was a frustrating experience. With little upfront success, we sought to engage professionals in the development community, providing them with drafts for critical comment, writing letters explaining our collaborative approach and sensitivity to economic constraints, etc. It took nearly a year of contacting our local Builder's Association before, unexpectedly, things changed. In a rapid succession of events, we achieved substantive dialogue, established common ground, and began planning for joint projects. The secret here was simply persistence. It is important to realize that the breaking down of stereotyped images and the establishment of trust cannot be rushed. This can be a challenge when you are working under a one year grant deadline. We were fortunate that the EPA SDCG program granted us generous extensions. These extensions were critical to achieving the success we are seeing today.

Mid-Course Correction: Narrow BMP Focus
At this point in the project, it became clear to us that our goal of promoting "water, soil, air, and energy-related pollution prevention/minimization practices" was far too broad. We decided to focus specifically on innovative stormwater management in urban and suburban settings. This is the most critical issue relative to our organizational mission and to our watershed.

The **Manual Preparation Phase** also became an ongoing project, as we continued to find new cases and practices; and it continues today as a living document. We purposely de-emphasized the role of the manual, which became know as "Growing Greener in Your Rappahannock River Watershed." We did

this because BMP manuals are commonplace, and our project was about constructively engaging developers to achieve actual on-the-ground practices. We knew that a project promoting a manual would at best succeed in getting the manual on the shelf of many developers, alongside numerous other manuals.

We developed "Growing Greener" as a *talking point document.* The document's primary purpose is to be used to cite real-world examples *during a personal meeting* with a builder, developer, engineer, or architect. All of our successes were the result of personal communication, not from giving people manuals. This is because questions inevitably arise in the reader's mind that aren't addressed in the manual. These questions become roadblocks and easy reasons not to take initiative to move forward. Personal meetings allowed those concerns to be voiced immediately, and for discussion on how to jointly address them. The meetings changed the dynamic into one of collaborative problem-solving instead of a one way lecture.

Mid Course Correction: Remove Roadblocks to Innovation

At this stage in the project, we had received sufficient feedback through our collaboration with members of the development community to realize that there were significant governmental roadblocks to achieving implementation of our goals. In particular, we became aware of local stormwater codes and code staff that were unfamiliar with or even hostile to the implementation of new techniques, even though the techniques showed environmental improvement. This often has to do with the inertia of the status quo, or the lack of flexibility given to staff in local governments. In an attempt to begin addressing this issue, we applied for and received a grant to travel throughout the watershed speaking to each board of supervisors in the 16-jurisdiction watershed. While it didn't necessarily change the status quo, it broke the ice for further cooperation. Soon, the local code compliance staff became an important target audience for this effort as well. While this issue is not fully resolved, we have come a long way. Our outreach to the local governments was also beneficial to our engagement of the development community, because it helped demonstrate to them that they weren't the only ones being asked to change, and that the problem wasn't all their fault.

The **Marketing / Outreach Phase** is the essence of the project that continues to grow today. It is based on the premise that people change their actions in the context of a relationship. Consequently, we focused our time meeting individually with members of the development community, often talking about specific projects. We would use the opportunity to bring up cases of where their colleagues in the development community had tried an innovative BMP. We would then reference our "Growing Greener" guide to give them specifics. One particularly effective tool was to use quotes in the guide from members of the development community. Name recognition of their colleagues was an important factor in helping promote an openness to the new ideas.

The Evaluation, Documentation, and Final Report Phase

Few people to spend time writing reports on their projects, and neither did we. But, in hindsight, we consider our quarterly reports and our evaluation of progress relative to our goals as an important part of the project. We did reporting and assessment throughout the project, which forced us to step back and take stock. It is easy to get so caught up in the immediate tasks that you can lose sight of the big picture. Planing time out to take stock is well worth the investment.

Some Specific Lessons We Learned

- ***Persistence*** is critical to the success of this type of outreach effort. Don't give up on a particular entity just because you have received no or little response. Developing trust and removing stereotypes takes time.
- ***Develop Technical Credibility.*** In order to be taken credibly with engineers or other development professionals, it is critical that you have a thorough knowledge of conventional practices, and of the mechanics of new practices you are promoting. Do not send someone to promote a practice unless they are prepared to answer tough technical questions.
- ***Take the Necessary Time*** to do it right. Don't rush a project due to an arbitrary deadline. If you can demonstrate interim success and a good plan, talk to your project sponsors about extensions. Building technical capacity takes time, just like building relationships.
- ***Speak Their Language.*** Builders and developers speak in terms of the bottom line, in terms of lot yield and infrastructure cost. Time is money; and the sooner you can internalize this reality into your problem-solving suggestions, the sooner your arguments will become persuasive to them.
- ***Don't Reinvent the Wheel.*** Do your homework to make sure you are not duplicating a product someone else has already done (eg a BMP manual).
- ***Build Personal Relationships.*** People change in the context of ongoing relationships. Handing someone a document will rarely result in a change of action, especially if it is from a relative stranger.
- ***Know Your Target Audience.*** Are you trying to influence builders or engineers? Knowing your audience affects your presentation and your research. Make sure the people you are targeting are actually the people who will make the decisions.
- ***Listen, first.*** Your first contact with someone in your target audience should first be in the context of listening, not telling. Take time to hear their gripes, their constraints, even if you don't agree with them. This is part of relationship building, and it leads to the trust that ultimately facilitates constructive dialogue and change.
- ***Find Common Ground.*** Seek to find something you agree on that meets both your goals. Ours was "curb and gutter". Builders didn't like it because of the expense; we didn't like it because it exacerbated runoff pollution problems. We developed a joint approach to address curb and gutter

regulations that was cost-effective and environmentally superior. This approach was the basis for our future cooperation.

- ***Identify Governmental Roadblocks.*** There is no use promoting something with a builder if a county won't let him do it. An effort promoting new approaches needs to be coordinated with the regulators. Do this up front to avoid delays or the discouragement of potential partners.
- ***Use Real Word Case Studies.*** We focused our guidebook an profiling real world projects. Builders and developers are much more open to experiment is they see a colleague who has done it successfully.
- ***Be Upfront with Limitations.*** Resist the temptation to whitewash the limitations or potential problems with a practice you may be promoting. Honesty builds credibility - which will make your target audience much more likely to cooperate. Lost credibility may be difficult, if not impossible, to rebuild.
- ***Get a Success on The Ground.*** Nothing is a better selling tool than a successful project. Work to get one project, and then use that as the initial centerpiece for the rest of your outreach effort.

Concluding Observations

In the field of watershed protection advocacy, the reality is that there are no guaranteed recipes. Typically, the road to success is a hard one, earned one developer, farmer, or locality at a time. Our advice for the watershed advocate is to work on developing you organization's "toolkit" of approaches. Like a carpenter, an advocate has a number of tools in his chest. Wise carpenters use the finer tools first, resorting to the sledgehammer when more constructive approaches fail.

The issue of having sufficient technical background may be the most difficult hurdle for a nonprofit organization. For groups where this tool may be missing from their pantry shelves, we would like to offer some suggestions:

1. Engage architects, engineers, and developers as part of your volunteer advocate team.
2. Invest in training. While these topics require study, they are not rocket science and they can be learned in a straightforward fashion.
3. Spend time "shadowing" your local code compliance or stormwater officials. Several days on the job can open your eyes to how the system works.
4. Engage graduate students. There are a lot of students with strong technical backgrounds who are looking for practical experience and a way to make a difference.
5. Resist the temptation to skimp on technical competency. It is a critical factor for success.

We hope that you take this cookbook for advocacy and adapt the recipes to your own circumstances and tastes. If you have specific questions on our programs, please contact us at:

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Updated copies of "Growing Greener" and this Cookbook are available on our website at www.crrl.org/for